

THE VICE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES
WASHINGTON

August 22, 1961

MEMORANDUM FOR: The President

FROM: Chester Bowles

This is in reply to your request of August 20 for my comments on our difficulties in obtaining support among the neutral nations for our position in Berlin.

First, let me say that from my recent conversations with leaders in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia I do not feel hopeless by any means about the degree of understanding of our Berlin position in those countries. Generally, speaking I found our position better understood than I had feared.

In most cases the degree of understanding and support depended on the context in which our Berlin views have been presented. This is the aspect of the problem which I stressed in my August 15 speech before the National Press Club. As you can see from the marked text of that speech, which I am enclosing, I do not feel we have done so badly to date.

I do feel strongly, however, that we have not yet developed to its real potential the kind of widespread understanding of our Berlin position which can and must be achieved. Understanding, sympathy, and support will accrue to that position to the degree that we can identify Berlin with the same dynamic struggle for freedom of choice which has permeated the recent histories of these neutral nations themselves.

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I fully agree that our position on Berlin has been a balanced one, that our military buildup has been measured and sober, that we have not over emphasized military measures in our public statements, and that we have placed ample emphasis on our readiness to negotiate reasonable solutions. Indeed, I myself have not encountered the "heavy criticism for our limited military buildup" of which your memorandum speaks. By contrast, the Soviet position has been in most parts of the world for what it actually is -- belligerent, angry and threatening.

The real difficulty lies elsewhere -- in the frequent lack of direct interest, empathy, and emotional involvement which a crisis in Europe often has for non-Europeans.

If it were not for the fact that the situation is very far removed from the experience of most Asians and Africans, the contrast between our moderation and Soviet belligerency might be sufficient. However, the general feeling in these "neutral" countries is, I believe, that while the Soviets are indeed belligerent, both sides must somehow be to blame for bringing the world close to the brink of destruction. A lingering "plague on both your houses" reaction is sometimes apparent.

However, in press conferences, public discussions and meetings with various leaders I found it was invariably possible to maximize an understanding of our position when I concentrated on the right of self-determination for the people of West Berlin.

Repeated stress on our legal rights in Berlin, important as they are, usually elicited little but indifference in these parts of the world. The West has too often used similar sounding legal arguments to maintain positions of special privilege in areas where the tide of nationalism has risen above the danger mark for Asians and Africans to be impressed by legal briefs.

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But while they are indifferent to legalities, they do not want us to sacrifice the people of West Berlin. In order to reach some sort of compromise with the Soviets. When you speak of our obligation to protect 2 1/2 million Berliners from being subjugated by a regime which they reject, you strike a sympathetic chord. This emphasis on free choice and self-determination is fundamental. It can be even more effectively used in getting our story across, for it is directly related to the recent political struggles in all of these countries.

I found a ready response when I pointed out that any failure by the United States to defend the right of the West Berliners to determine their political system would inevitably undermine the rights of Asians and Africans to determine their own political destinies. All our reports from our embassies in these areas agree that the self-determination issue is the only one which brings Berlin home to these nations. Ed Murrow has been doing a very effective job of pressing this case and should be encouraged to redouble his efforts.

The Asian and African leaders have come a long way in the past two or three years toward a better understanding of the Soviet threat. They instinctively shrink from a confrontation which could plunge the world into chaos. For this reason I am convinced that, if we pitch our case with the right tone and on the right arguments, the more responsible neutrals can be helpful to us in the U.N. and elsewhere.

The Belgrade Conference of non-aligned nations and states will, I think, be characterized by moderation rather than extremism on Berlin. Tito, Nehru and other major figures who will be at that meeting are very deeply concerned about Berlin and, at least when I saw them, were in no mood to contribute to our dilemmas. I think our show of firmness tempered with moderation has thus far struck a responsive chord.

They will expect us to move on from here, however. By that I mean that we must soon make it clear that we are prepared to come forward with some thoughtful negotiating proposals of our own if we are to maintain or increase their sympathy. A posture of continuing firmness tied to an appearance of negotiating uneasiness could destroy much of the satisfactory response we have thus far attracted.

In this connection there is a real danger for us in pressing the self-determination argument on Berlin unless we continue to uphold it elsewhere. Asians and Africans immediately ask: Why, if you are so interested in the rights of self-determination for the white people of West Berlin, are you indifferent about these rights in Angola, Goa, Taiwan and Tunisia? I think this question can be effectively answered in our policies, our public attitudes and our U.N. votes. In trying to answer this question, I have stressed our fundamental attachment to the principle of self-determination originally expressed in our Declaration of Independence and I have reaffirmed our continuing commitment to that principle as the ideal for peoples on every continent.

However, I have distinguished between those situations where we have a clear legal or moral commitment to defend presently existing rights already enjoyed for the local populace, as in Berlin, and those other situations where no such direct commitment as yet exists. To say that America believes in the importance of self-determination for peoples everywhere does not preclude us from candidly admitting that we are not omnipotent, and we cannot obtain these rights for every people in every corner of the earth all at the same time. All we can do is to try to stand squarely in favor of the principle and take what steps we can to assist in achieving it wherever possible - and at least, as in Berlin, not allow the frontier of freedom to recede.

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This explanation seems usually to be accepted with one caveat: that the least we can do is to express support for the principle consistently by our votes in the U.N.

This is why it is so essential that we couple our words about self-determination with continuing deeds. Our U.N. vote on Angola last spring and our subsequent policy toward Angola is viewed throughout Africa and Asia as an heartening improvement. Nevertheless, there is the unspoken conviction that Americans generally consider dark-skinned people inferior and that when the chips are down they are likely to side with Portugal, France, and our other white-skinned European allies.

This conviction runs deep in Africa and the Middle East, and only slightly less so in Asia. Everywhere just under the surface lies the assumption that our revolutionary commitment largely concerns itself with those who have white skins. We must assume that our every move directly involving Africa and Africans themselves will be viewed with deep suspicion and that compromises by us will create bitterly irrational reactions. The depth and potential ugliness of this mood cannot be exaggerated.

If we are to preach the doctrine of self-determination in Europe we cannot and must not allow Portugal, France or any other European nation to veto our support for that principle in Asia and Africa. I do not minimize the dangers that an embittered France or Portugal pose for our position in Europe or the importance of allied unity in a time of crisis. But our European allies, as much as we, have a tremendous stake in obtaining world support for our Berlin position. One of the greatest tasks now before us is to find the courage to lead our alliance rather than to follow it and to raise the vision of some of our NATO allies to the requirements of a world rather than a European power balance.


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1. A speech or public statement at a press conference by you just prior to the Belgrade meeting would have great impact on these nations, particularly if it stressed the self-determination issue and the overriding question of free choice for West Berliners. You could relate the Berlin crisis to the struggle against colonial oppression and for self-determination throughout the world. You should insist that the cause of free choice in Africa and Asia is inextricably linked to the safeguarding of freedom in West Berlin.

2. At the U.N. we should vote in favor of a moderate resolution on Bizerte with full knowledge that our problems in Paris will be seriously exacerbated. If we fail Bourguiba on this question we cannot expect other African leaders to make similar efforts for many years to come to reach an accommodation between their European ties and the historical forces of nationalism which have already swept Europeans from much of the African continent. Moreover, we can be sure that Bourguiba's bitterness will explode at the Belgrade conference to sweep away the effect of our arguments in favor of self-determination in Berlin.

3. We are asking key posts abroad to tell us what seem to be the weak spots in our Berlin case in the eyes of the neutrals and are trying to shape our propaganda line accordingly. Reports thus far support the conclusion that self-determination is the only issue which has much impact. We are therefore instructing our missions in neutral countries to stress this principle in all their discussions of the Berlin question.

4. We must insist, despite current French opposition, that we prepare a full set of negotiating proposals covering a range of issues in central Europe, and we must take discreet steps to assure key neutrals that we are


doing so - without, of course, in any sense detracting from the importance of our military buildup. Only if they are really convinced that we are ready for responsible negotiations will the neutrals be prepared to support us should the Berlin case come before the U.N. this fall (as it almost inevitably will).

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In conclusion, let me say once again that I am not pessimistic about our ability to get our position across to the Afro-Asian leaders if we concentrate on the question of self-determination and if we can demonstrate in the next two or three months by our votes in the United Nations that we support this principle around the world.

We cannot expect the neutrals to share our point of view completely, but there is a greater identity of interest than has been so far apparent. This realization is now growing and can be steadily strengthened if we do not negate all our arguments by compromises in other areas reached in the cause of NATO solidarity. That solidarity is vital but I am convinced that our allies will follow us on Berlin in their own interests if we are wise and prudent. We cannot let them leave our vision elsewhere. To do so would be disastrous outside Europe and could cost a heavy price on Berlin as well.

Enclosure:

National Press Club
Speech, August 15, 1961.

